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Old John Burroughs

FRA ELEBRTUS



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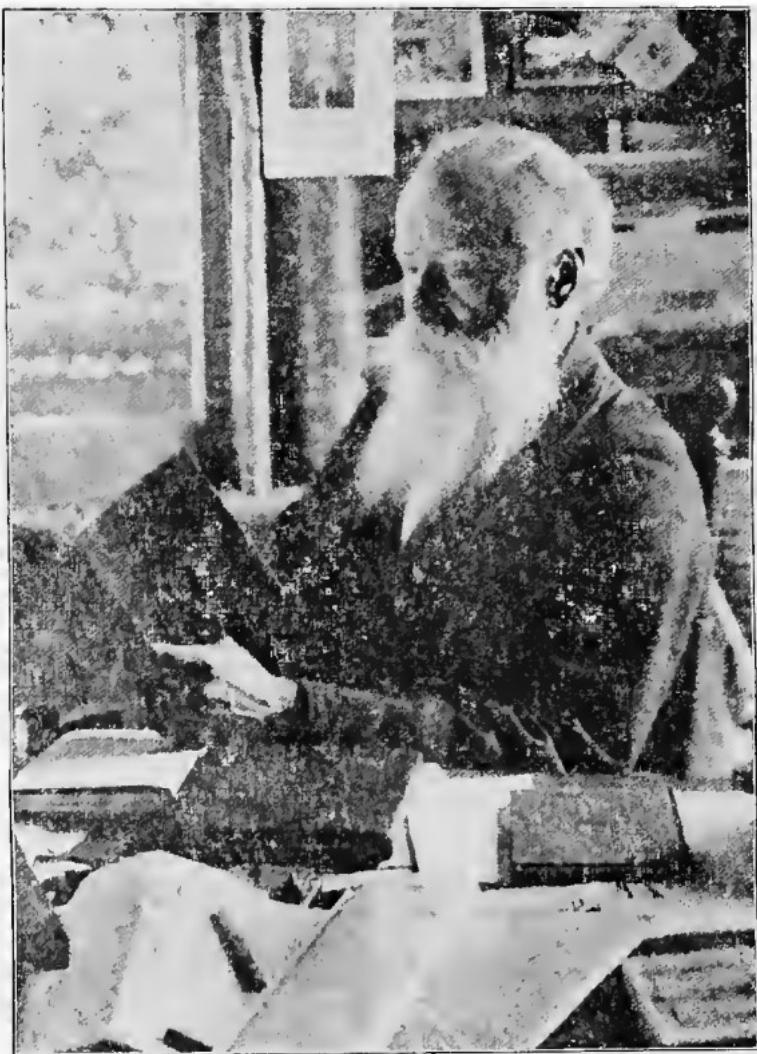
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OLD JOHN BURROUGHS

By
FRA ELBERTUS

Elbert Hubbard



The Roycroft Shop
East Aurora, New York

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MY OWN SHALL COME TO ME.

Serene I fold my hands and wait,
Nor care for wind, nor tide, nor sea ;
I rave no more 'gainst time nor fate,
For lo ! my own shall come to me.

I stay my haste, I make delays,
For what avails this eager pace ?
I stand amid the eternal ways,
And what is mine shall know my face.

Asleep, awake, by night or day,
The friends I seek are seeking me ;
No wind can drive my bark astray,
Nor change the tide of destiny.

What matter if I stand alone ?
I wait with joy the coming years ;
My heart shall reap when it has sown,
And garner up its fruit of tears.

The waters know their own, and draw
The brook that springs in yonder heights.
So flows the good with equal law
Unto the soul of pure delights.

The stars come nightly to the sky
The tidal wave unto the sea ;
Nor time, nor space, nor deep, nor high,
Can keep my own away from me.

OLD JOHN BURROUGHS



T is seven o'clock in the morning. I am writing this at Slab-Sides, & out through the climbing Morning Glories, upon which the dew yet sparkles, I see Old John Burroughs working intently in the garden. He is hatless and coatless, and his tumbled snow-white hair & beard, from this distance, seem like an aureole as he leans over at his work. The sun, peeping over the mountain top, seems to caress him. Its rays fall upon him like a benediction. He is the center of the picture ; all around him is the green growing celery ; & outside of this little valley, fenced in by nature's forest, rise the hills, emerald at the base, growing purple at the top—crowned by white mist—with here & there fierce jutting gray crags, as though to show by antithesis that this scene of sweet peace has not always been.

¶ Old John Burroughs! Why do we call you "Old"? Not because you are sixty-six, come Michaelmas—bless me ! no. Yours is the heart of youth. You never were so in love with life. Your ruddy face is bronzed by the kiss of the breeze ; your eyes twinkle

with merriment or fill with tender sympathy ; you have the “ flat back ” that George Eliot tells about, in *Adam Bede*, and your every attribute and gesture speaks of expectant youth & God’s great, generous, free Out-of-Doors. The only sign of age I see upon you is your whitened hair. We call you “ Old ” as a mark of endearment—it is the tender diminutive. We remember Browning’s lines :

Grow old along with me,
The best is yet to be,
The last of life,
For which the first was made.

And we are mindful, too, that the passing years have brought you rich gifts—“ Being old, I shall know ! ” And so when we speak of you as “ Old John,” we do it with lowered voice, full of reverence, mellow with love, & ripe with respect for a life well lived.

¶ Old John has left me here to do the dishes & tidy up the cabin. I saw he wanted to go to work in the garden, so I suggested a division of labor. He protested a little—he always wants to do all the unpleasant tasks himself—but finally consented, and went away with a smile which said, “ Go ahead, now—we ’ll see what kind of a housekeeper

you are!" And he *will* see. I am writing at his table, with a pen made from an eagle's feather which we found up on the mountain-side yesterday. This pad is his, too—and mine, for he said everything here is mine; and it was no orientalism, either.

What will he say when he comes in & finds the work not done?—I promised to join him at the celery in an hour. I think I'll just carry the dishes out and place them on the rocks in the little stream; dish-washing is a waste of time. And as for disorder, what could be worse than this table? But then, Starr King had a great lecture on the "Laws of Disorder." I really wonder if there can be a law that regulates confusion! Montaigne said, "Nature is a sloven;" still she seems to arrive. Perhaps what we call disorder is really system, at the last. I have no doubt but Old John knows every blessed thing on this table and where to put his hand on anything in the cabin, even in the dark. Some girls came over here from Vassar, once, Old John told me, and undertook the task of cleaning up the place in the owner's absence. They put things away so effectively that it was a month before he really began

to feel at home. I think I will just place the dishes in the stream, and respect the Laws of Disorder—it would be a shame to make a dear old man feel strange in his own house ! It is amazing what a lot of things are in this cabin — birds' nests, birds' eggs, feathers, fungi, curious crooked sticks, and I believe to goodness that all the books are meant for is to press flowers !

I wonder if Old John ever answers his correspondence ! Here is a pile of letters unopened—surely they have been here a month or more. From these different pads of paper, partially filled, it is evident that he has half a dozen subjects in hand currently ; & when he writes he takes up the topic his mood prompts. This pile of notes under the flat stone must have been accumulating a long while—he is always making notes. The eagle's feather we found yesterday suggested a thought, and he said to me, "That eagle moulted the feather because he is growing a better one." He might have gone on and explained that life consists in moulting one's illusions ; and that we form creeds only to throw them away to-morrow ; and that the wise man is ready to relinquish everything

and anything, confident that something better is in store,—but he did n't explain or moralize. We walked four miles or more, "injun file," without a word. Then he turned to me and said, "I like you—we understand each other—we can be silent together."

Clearly this habit of writing down his thoughts, as they come in the passing of the quiet hours, has long been a fixed one with John Burroughs. He makes memoranda on backs of envelopes, margins of newspapers, or on birch bark; and on the walls of Slab-Sides are various jottings in hieroglyph. Evidently it is all a good deal like the work of the magpie that hides things away and forgets where they are. But then John Burroughs does n't care where they are, and I suppose the magpie does not, either; only John has the thought hidden away in his brain-cells, & when the time is ripe it comes forth, just as a bee is born out of its sealed-up cell.

I told John that old story about Emerson getting up in the night and groping for matches, knocking down the family What-Not. "Are you ill, Waldo?" called his wife in piccolo accents. "No, my dear," answered

the author of *Self Reliance*, “no, my dear: only an idea !”

John laughed as if he had never heard the story before, and then explained in half apology that he himself makes notes of ideas only in the daytime—he values sleep (and What-Nots) too much to think of writing at night.

His face shows that—he sleeps like a boy, and eats like a hired man. His broad, brown hands are without a particle of tremor, and his strongly corded neck tells of manly abstinence and of passion that was never in the saddle.

Appetite has never got the better of this man, galloping him to the grave. He has not wooed the means of debility and disease, & put an enemy in his mouth to steal away his brains. For himself, John Burroughs has no use for tobacco or stimulants ; and so you find him turning into the last lap of the three-score-and-ten with breath sweet as a baby’s, muscles that do the bidding of his brain, and nerves that never go on a strike. Yet he has been a man of strong passions and appetites. In stature he is rather small, but the way he carries the crown of his head

and his chin, reveals the well-sexed man. He is a natural lover.

How do I know? Well, any man is a lover who writes well. Literature is a matter of passion. All art is a secondary sexual manifestation, just as is the song of the birds, their gay and gaudy plumage, the color and perfume of flowers. It is love writes all true poems, paints all pictures, sings all songs.

This man is a lover. Yet I know nothing of his private history, neither do I want to. He never told me "the sad story of his life"—only weaklings have the confessional habit—neither does he explain or apologize. His life is its own excuse for being. The man himself is explanation enough; every man is to a great degree the product of what has gone before—he is a sequence. More than that,—man is a tablet upon which is written his every word, and thought, and deed. He is the Record of himself. The Record is the Man, and the Man is the Record. It will be easy to reckon accounts at the Last Great Day. The Judge will only have to unfold the heart and look:—all is graven there—nothing was ever hidden nor can it be. God is not mocked.

This man will say to his Maker, “See, thus was I—my claim is only this!” And the chief gem in his diadem shall be a great, sublime and all-enfolding love.

Why do I say this? I say it because the truth is this:—No man ever reached the spiritual heights that this man has attained save through the love of One. From this love of One, his love radiates to all—he becomes Universal.

Men who have not tasted the Divine Passion belong to a sect, a society, a city, a country. They work for their own little church, hurrah for their own society, canvass for their pee-wee party, fight for their own country. They cannot love virtue without hating vice. If they regard America they detest England. They are like Orange John of Harvard, whose loyalty to Cambridge found vent in the cry, “T’ ell wi’ Yale!”—a sentiment to which even yet most Harvard men inwardly respond.

John Burroughs is the most Universal man I can name at the present moment. He is a piece of Elemental Nature. He has no hate, no whim, no prejudice. He believes in the rich, the poor, the learned, the ignorant. He

believes in the wrong-doer, the fallen, the sick, the weak and the defenceless. He loves children, animals, birds, insects, trees and flowers. He is one who is afraid of no man, and of whom no man is afraid. He puts you at your ease—you could not be abashed before him. In his presence there is no temptation to deceive, to overstate, to understate—to be anything different from what you are. You could confess to this man—reveal your soul and tell the worst; and his only answer would be, “I know! I know!” And tears of sympathy and love would dim those heaven-blue eyes.

Yet when I alighted from a West Shore train, I got off alone, and he was the only man at the railroad station. No faces peered from the windows as he stood there leaning against the building; no one came out upon the platform to see him; the trainmen did not call out, “This is the home of John Burroughs!” Neither conductor, brakeman, baggageman, nor mail agent glanced toward the simple old farmer standing there, meditatively chewing a straw. The fireman, however, knew him, for he dropped his shovel and leaning out of the cab, waved a salute,

which was returned as comrade greets comrade.

John Burroughs was in no hurry to rush forward and greet me—he is the only man that I ever knew who is never in a hurry about anything. He has all the time there is. We met as if we had parted yesterday. I looked down the long line of the train, and hoped the fireman would swing off, too, and let the engineer take his old train, alone, down the two streaks of rust to Weehawken; but the fresh smoke was streaming forth from the stack, & I knew the fireman was at his post. I was disappointed. He could have washed his grimy face in the creek and we could all have had dinner together—I quite liked the fellow! He might have gone with us, and eaten a dinner cooked by the man who has made one acre of waste ground produce, each year, a thousand dollars' worth of celery, where there was no celery before. I quite liked the fellow!

¶ There! I 've been sitting at this table an hour. Old John is standing up, looking this way—he thinks it is time his visitor should materialize and do a little honest work. Now he is walking over towards a stump where

hangs his vest, with his watch in the pocket, a watch of the Cap'n Cuttle pattern—he is going to see what time it is. I think I 'll just let the dishes go, and when Old John comes in, I 'll get him to talking about the times when he and Walt Whitman lived together in Washington ; and then we will have dinner and he will not notice that the dishes are not washed. After dinner I 'll fix 'em up—it is really a waste of time to wash dishes !

Under my hand is a letter headed, " Emerson College of Oratory!" They are an ambitious lot—those E. C. O. girls! This one says she recites, " Serene I fold my hands and wait!" She wants the author to be so kind as to please write it out for her in MS. The Poet has evidently started to comply, for here is the first stanza and two lines of the second. Evidently he could n't think of the rest and is waiting until he finds the book. That is a great poem, though!—the E. C. O. girl is right. It was written forty-three years ago—that 's all—in Washington, when the author was twenty-three years old. He read it to Walt Whitman the morning after he wrote it, and Walt said it was not nearly so bad as it might be.

"Is it so, John?" I asked him the other day.

"Is what so?" he answered.

"Why, that mine own shall come to me?"

"Yes, if you hustle. Every truth is only a half truth—how about your own masterpiece, 'Carrying the Lettuce to Gomez?'"

"That is all truth!" I answered, "I wrote it."

"Is it truth, though? Why, it is about like that tramp you took when you walked the length of Ireland, and rode most of the way in a jaunting car."

I changed the subject, and began to talk about boys.

¶ John Burroughs has written delightfully of boys and told how they live in a world of their own, oblivious absolutely of the interests of grown-ups. He is a good deal of a boy himself: he has the eager, receptive mental attitude. He is full of hope and is ever expecting to see something beautiful—something curious. Each day for him is a New Day, and he goes out in the morning and looks up at the clouds and scans the distant hills; and as he walks he watches for new things, or old things that may appear in

One day I saw three girls wandering about the bushy fields to the south of the road. I met them later as they were about to leave on the train, & they told me they had been all the afternoon looking for Gladricks. I told them they should have written me to meet them. They replied that General Nuttall had said I did not open my letters, so they thought it was no use to write, & in what you dictated me if - & these pretty Russian girls ate that! But you will probably stand away some hours - & the alland may balance. Your article was reprinted in a Poughkeepsie Evening paper. I shall need your "Time & Change" by & by.

You wrote did not convince
my kind man that I really do
know these birds in the
Colony, "unconsciously" to him.
I trust you keep well, With
many good wishes & an

Fretfully Yours

John Brewster

a new light. This habit of expectancy always marks the strong man. It is a form of attraction—our own comes to us because we desire it; we find what we expect to find, and we receive what we ask for. All life is a prayer—strong natures pray most—and every earnest, sincere prayer is answered. Old John Burroughs' life is a prayer for beauty. He looks for beauty and goodness, and lo ! these things are added unto him.

John Burroughs and Walt Whitman were friends and comrades in Washington during the war. Both were clerks in the Treasury Department; and when Walt lost his job because a certain man did n't appreciate *Leaves of Grass*, John offered Walt a home and half of his pay until he should find another place. John did n't tell me this, but I know it is so.

Walt Whitman did n't waste his money—he was not dissipated—but he had a bad habit of giving dollar bills away to people whom he thought less fortunate than he; so the natural result was he seldom had many dollar bills himself.

Many people have criticized Whitman because he did not enlist and help fight his

country's battles, instead of contenting himself with the rather womanish task of nursing the wounded. Whitman was a brave man, and he did not enlist simply because he had a supreme horror of war. That is, he loved the men on both sides & loved them equally well. This being true, his soul revolted at thought of levelling a gun at a brother, and then shooting when ordered to. Whitman did n't think it was necessary for men to kill other men ; and he further thought that to abrogate your will and kill a man on another man's order, was quite as bad as to kill a man of your own volition. The proposition of transferring conscience to an intangible thing called Government, was quite as absurd to him as transferring your reasoning powers to a something called a Church—a man should be a Man. He did n't believe in a man abandoning his own free-will, as a soldier must. A soldier is a slave—he does what he is told to do—everything is provided for him—his head is a superfluity. He is only a stick used by men to strike other men ; and he is often tossed to hell without a second thought.

The people soldiers kill are never any worse

than they themselves—and very often are better. The Confederate soldiers were just as patriotic, just as sincere, just as brave, just as intelligent, as were the Northern troops—everybody admits that now. For a Northern farmer who raised corn, to go down South and kill a farmer who raised cotton, was monstrous and absurd to Walt Whitman. And he thought that the man who killed another man was just as unfortunate as the man who got killed. There is no such thing as success in a bad business—killing men is a bad business. To kill another man means damnation for yourself—the man who kills another *does* kill himself. Walt Whitman looked upon every man as a part of himself, and the conviction of his life was that to injure another is to injure yourself—to help another is to help yourself.

Whitman had a profound regard for Lincoln, and one of his best and closest friends was Peter Doyle, the street car driver and Confederate soldier. Walt did n't blame Peter for going to war—Walt did n't blame anybody for anything. And he loved Lincoln for what he was and for the masterly way in which he did his work, as you will see by

reading *Captain, My Captain*, or that elegy unsurpassed, *When Lilacs Last in the Door-yard Bloomed*. Walt was quite willing to let every man go ahead and do the thing he wanted to do, until he got his fill of it and found it wrong—or right.

Now doubtless there be small men who pop up and ask in orotund, “What would ha’ become of this country in 1860 if everybody in it had been like Walt Whitman and John Burroughs?” And the answer is, that if everybody in it had been like Walt Whitman and John Burroughs, there would have been no issue, and therefore no war.

¶ That old Silver-Top out there in the celery has done more than any other living man to inaugurate the love of Out-of-Doors that is now manifesting itself as a Nature Renaissance. Within twenty years a silent revolution has been worked out in favor of country life; and this new sympathy with our mute brothers, the animals, has come along as a natural result. A man down near Poughkeepsie said to me, “I believe John Burroughs has influenced everybody for twenty miles around here in favor of not killing birds and things.”

And I answered, "Sir, John Burroughs has influenced the entire civilized world against killing things."

The seed which Thoreau planted, Burroughs has watered and tended. Yet as a writer he is just as virile—just as original—as Thoreau, and, unlike Thoreau, he has no antagonisms. He has made the fragmentary philosophy of Whitman a practical working gospel, and prepared the way for Bolles, Seton-Thompson, Van Dyke, Skinner, and a hundred other strong writers; & for all that army of boys and girls and men and women who now hunt the woods with camera instead of gun; or my dear old father who prospects with a spade in search of ginseng, sarsaparilla, arrow heads and "relics."

Just a straw to show how the wind has veered: In 1889 a bill was introduced in the New York State Assembly to prohibit the hunting of deer with hounds. The bill met with a fierce opposition and was only passed, by a bare majority, after considerable delay and a determined fight. In the winter of 1900 another bill was gently and diplomatically presented, amending the first bill so as to make an exception in favor of one county.

'This county is in the Adirondack region, & is mostly owned by one man who uses the land as a game preserve for himself and friends. This man wanted the legal privilege of hunting deer with dogs—"for only a few days in the year," he explained half apologetically.

Did the people of New York grant the gentleman's request?

Most certainly they did not.

The bare mention in the newspapers that such a petition had been presented caused every Senator and Assemblyman to be swamped with letters of protest. The bill was hissed out of court. It was as if some one had asked the privilege of hunting men with dogs—we would have none of it. From what one Assemblyman in 1889 called "a mere freakish bit of maudlin sentimentalism of a few unknown cranks" to a fixed fact of public opinion in 1900—that is the way we have grown! And for this let credit be given John Burroughs, more than to any other man.

¶ Well, well, it is nine o'clock—the sun is getting clear above the hill-top. Old John will surely think that all my talk about the

“ Tolstoy Act ” is pure preachy-preachment, and that I live my strenuous life by proxy. Oho ! I hear voices, women’s voices—along the winding pathway. Through the trees, three girls are approaching—Vassar girls, for sure, on a pious pilgrimage. They are heading for the cabin—I ’ll just tell them they cannot see the Prophet until they wash the dishes and make this shack all neat and tidy.

There ! that lets me out.

Now for the celery !



*HERE THEN ENDETH AN APPRECIATION
OF OLD JOHN BURROUGHS AS WRITTEN
BY FRA ELBERTUS AND DONE INTO A
BOOKLET BY THE ROYCROFTERS AT
THEIR SHOP, WHICH IS SITUATE IN EAST
AURORA, COUNTY OF ERIE, NEW YORK*



